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*The Nature, Uses, Dangers, Sufferings, and
Preservatives, of the Human Imagination.*

A
SERMON,
SERMON,

PREACHED IN THE
CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF
ST. PAUL, LONDON,

ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 31, 1796.

By WILLIAM JONES, M.A. F.R.S.
AUTHOR OF THE *MAN OF SIN*, &c.

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1796.

The Native Use, Dialect, Sufferings, and

Progress of the African Slave Trade

SERMON

PREACHED IN THE

CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF

ST. PAUL, LONDON,

ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 21. 1790.

By WILLIAM JONES, M.A. F.R.S.

ADVOCATE OF THE BARR OF THE KING'S BENCH.

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1790.

SERMON.

GEN. vi. 5.

God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

IN the short and comprehensive history of the time before the flood, we are told how sin first arose; how it came to maturity; and how it was punished. The words of this text do not give us a systematical account of it; but we may thence collect, what is the seat of it, and how it operates in the consti-

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tution of man: a subject which demands a close and serious scrutiny. For the nature of man is still the same: evil now keeps its place as in the beginning; it arises in the same manner, and gathers strength from the same causes.

Of all the things we see, nothing can be truly understood in its first principles. God alone can see things in their beginnings, who is himself the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end of all things. We can trace them so far only as he hath been pleased to disclose them to us; not for physical, but for moral purposes.

The wickedness of man is here said to consist in the evil workings of his *imagination*: the imagination therefore is that faculty, in which the wickedness of man hath its beginning. To understand this better, we must examine what the imagination is, how it works, is worked upon, and with what effects;

effects; a matter of more concern to us, than all the curious disquisitions that can be written upon the understanding. He that can discover the seat of a disease, and tell us how it may be cured, or how it may be prevented, is a more useful man in an hospital, though in a lower office, than the curious demonstrator, who can descant on the structure and œconomy of the human frame. And here, one hint from the word of God, who knoweth whereof we are made, and in what respects we are become degenerate, will carry us farther in an hour, than our conjectural researches in the whole course of our lives.

Let us then first obtain what light we can from the sense of the words, which the wisdom of God hath used in the text, to denote the *imagination* and *thoughts* of man. The terms of the original are translated, I believe, as accurately as they can be; and only want a little explaining. The word

we render *imagination*, has the sense of *forming* and *figuring*, as a potter forms the clay, or a seal gives the impressi^on; and when applied to the mind, denotes its faculty of receiving and forming images. When it receives them it is passive; when it forms them it is active. The other word, which signifies the *thoughts*, has the sense of *adding*, *computing*, or *putting things together*: and as all the faculties of the mind can work together, like the members of the body, this operation of the head is very much under the influence of the heart, which is the seat of the passions: so that what the head can form in image and figure, the heart and affections can compound and put together. If the images of the mind are rightly compared, the result is truth; if improperly, unnaturally, or unfairly, the result is error. The old logicians, in tracing the operations of the mind, have told us very truly, that the mind compares two ideas, and thence forms a judgment. If a man
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does this falsely for himself, he is deluded : but if his intent is to deceive, he does the same thing for others ; and having presented to them a false composition of ideas, he leads their judgment wherever he pleases. To put the images of the mind truly and faithfully together, is the greatest wisdom of man ; and it is what the word of God hath taught us how to do throughout the images of nature ; particularly in the parables of Christ, by which he instructs the world ; to put images falsely together, is the artifice of Satan, by which he deceives the world ; and by which wicked men never fail to deceive one another.

(The subject now before us is so deep and curious, that it would admit of much subtile disquisition ; which, however, I shall avoid as much as I can, and endeavour to make it plain and profitable, by shewing the right use of the imagination, with the dangers we are under, and the punishment we suffer

from the abuse of it. After which, if I can prescribe such rules as will secure us from the evils of the imagination, the moral end I have in view will be answered.

Truth being the great object of the understanding, the use of the imagination is to give us pictures and images of truth; and without the aid of such pictures, we can receive but little information. Give the mind a well-adapted image, and in that image it will see truth; an object so beautiful in itself, that it will see it with delight; and the influence between the imagination and the affections, being reciprocal, a great advantage is obtained, if the affections are once interested in the cause of truth; or, (as the Scripture speaks) "receive the love" of it. 2: Theff. ii. 10. He is one of the best friends to mankind, who presents images to the head, with design to amend the heart. Emblems, of a moral signification, furnish a most excellent mode of instruction; especially to minds young and inexpe-

inexperienced: for while new ideas are acquired, and the fancy is amused, the heart gets understanding, and becomes prepared for action. Great pains have therefore been taken in this way by antient moralists: but the method itself is of such sovereign use, that our blessed Saviour observed it in all his discourses; he never spake without a parable; that is, without some natural illustration of truth; and the like method is followed in all the teaching of the Bible; where divine and moral truth is conveyed to the mind under some sign or figure of life, the examples of which are without end.

This mode of instruction is not only necessary, as being accommodated to the faculties of man; but it is of all others the most agreeable; because the mind is delighted with every kind of *imitation*; and accordingly, they that undertake to delight the mind, whatever their intention may be, always have recourse to imitation in some shape or other.

There are occasions, when it is not possible to get access to the judgment, and to set the truth before it, but under some image of the truth. Of this we have an example in the address of the prophet Nathan to King David, which may stand for all the rest. The prophet set before his imagination a parable, wherein wickedness and cruelty were so discernible, that the judgment of the king immediately pronounced upon the case, without being aware that he was passing sentence upon himself: and when he saw it was impossible to retract, he was brought to shame and penitence; to which, it is probable, he never could have been brought by any other way of reasoning: and all this was effected by applying properly to his imagination. There are few minds, however ill disposed, which may not be wrought upon in this oblique manner; and the ignorant are sooner instructed by it than by any other, which makes it so proper for the teaching of children. More may thus be learned in an hour

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from a plain simple teacher, than in a year, under the dry and abstracted language of the wisest philosopher. In the parable of the sower, a volume of Christian instruction is communicated under a short form. It sets before the eyes a case in the course of nature, parallel to the preaching of the gospel: and when once the similitude is pointed out, a train is kindled, which runs to a great length, and without which it is not easy for the mind to get forward. For there are subjects, which the best and the wisest of mankind cannot understand, till they are taught after the manner of children. There are things of a sublime and spiritual nature, which our reason would understand as they are in themselves; but it cannot be: for here the judgment can get nothing without the help of the imagination. For the conceiving of many things which the gospel reveals, the glass of the natural creation must be used; and they must be viewed as they are thence reflected to the understanding. From the light of the day,

day, we learn to value the light of divine truth; from the sun, too bright for the eyes to look upon, we learn, that God is too great for the mind to comprehend; from the element of air and its operations, we know there may be ministering spirits; in whom great power is united to a substance invisible; and even the divine Spirit, as the Lord and giver of life, is understood from the natural air, or breath, upon which we live. By such teaching as this, we are raised above ourselves; we ascend up to God by the scale of his creation; and while we are in this world can foretaste the wisdom of a better. This is the best and highest use of the imagination; and if I have been so happy as to make myself understood, we may now go on to the abuse of the imagination.

For, the thoughts of man's heart, which put things truly together, for good, can put them falsely together, for evil; and be prepared for hell by those powers and actions of
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the mind, which should lift us up to heavens. The first evil that came into the world, entered by this way of the imagination. On that faculty the tempter pleased, when he promised a sort of wisdom independent of God, and a sort of happiness consistent with disobedience. It was suggested to our first parents, that a new light would break in upon their minds; and that in consequence of it, they would rise to an equality with God. Here is first a vision for the head; and with it a lesson of pride for the heart: and thus the first sin is a pattern of every other. In every temptation, some alluring object is held up; the image of it works upon the heart; the heart re-acts upon the head; false and irrational compositions are formed, and vain expectations are raised: the act is sin; the result is error; and the end is death. Yet, in this manner doth the mind of man, in his present fallen state, and left to itself, never fail to work. if the text be true, every imagination, of the thoughts of his heart is only evil

continually. The first motion to sin begins in the imagination; and it may be questioned whether any one instance can be produced to the contrary. The passions, so productive of evil works, do all act as the imagination directs, to fulfil some vision it has entertained. Love, hatred, hope, fear, envy, revenge, and despair, which contribute in their turns to agitate and torment the heart of man, do all operate according to the measures of the imagination; that is, according to the images the mind hath formed of persons and things; of itself within, and of the world without. The slightest affront will give unpardonable offence to the man who has formed a great idea of himself: when disappointed he is exceedingly hurt; because the magnitude of the disappointment will be according to the rate or value he has set upon his own person: so that one man shall even be killed outright with indignation and despair, by an accident, which another circumspect man, of an humble mind, would
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not feel for half an hour. A grand idea of this world in a man's head, with the love of its wealth or its fame in his heart, will work together, till they produce strange effects, and turn a man of sense into a fool : of which we can find no greater example, than in the case of an avaritious person ; who admires gold for its use in procuring every thing ; and with it procures nothing. The thoughts of his heart unite together wealth and happiness : the wealth, with much toil and anxiety, and perhaps no small degree of fraud and injustice, is realized : but the happiness is still a vision as at first : it began in the imagination, and it never gets any farther.

Our danger will be better understood, when we consider how the imagination is furnished with matter by the two senses of the sight and the hearing. The Psalmist apprehending this, did wisely pray, *O turn away mine eyes lest they behold vanity !* When the passions are enslaved, and ruin is inevitable,

able, how often do the deluded sufferers wish, they had never beheld such and such objects! So much sin enters by the sight, that the son of Sirach (chap. xxxi. 13.) pronounced, there is nothing more wicked than the eye; that therefore it *weepeth*, and is made the fountain of sorrow in every countenance. On this consideration, public spectacles and stage entertainments, so alluring to the eye, and so curiously provided, are always dangerous, and not seldom fatal: for by indulging this luxurious and insatiable appetite of the eye, distempers are introduced into the mind, of which it is never cured. The objects there presented to the sight, are either corrupting in themselves, or made so by art and circumstance. Piety, goodness and virtue, are quiet and obscure: they pass through life without noise or figure: but the spirit of intrigue is active and busy; productive of plot and incident; vice is enthusiastic, impetuous, and picturesque; and furnishes matter of grand effect, fit for stages and theatres.

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When good and evil are both misrepresented, which often happens, the mind of an unguarded spectator catches the misrepresentation, and makes it a rule of action. Let the self-murderer appear with dignity, and the robber be merry and successful, upon the stage; suicides and thieves will be increased and multiplied. This is not speculation; it is undoubted fact. What a common artifice it is, to couple something that is great and sacred with something which is mean and contemptible; to make it ridiculous, and provoke insult! While that which is base, worthless, and pernicious, shall be raised and recommended, by joining it to something that is good; or, which the times agree to call good. These arts of deception are so necessary to the cause of wickedness, that prints, pictures, public fights, and shews, are always employed to work upon the mind, by the fabricators of public mischief. They can lead religion and loyalty to be hooted at and burned with disgrace; while sedition and

treason

treason are carried home upon men's shoulders in triumph. No preposterous disguises or deceptions can be wondered at, in any age or country, when it is remembered, that the Lord of Glory was disfigured by a wicked world with a crown of thorns; and the hand, that can aim the lightnings of heaven, insulted with a weak reed for a sceptre: while, perhaps, Barabbas, the acquitted felon, was attended home with acclamations.

The ears are imposed upon by sounds, as the eyes by appearances: the orator can work with deceitful images and false comparisons, to inflame the passions, and mislead the judgment. That prime intellectual juggler of the times, Voltaire, whose logic has driven the world to madness, never fails to work upon his readers with false associations: they are his peculiar manufacture. His reasonings are contemptible; but his power in debauching the minds of men, by setting false images before them, is prodigious, and would be

unaccountable, if the principle now before us did not explain it all.

I shall conclude upon this part of my subject, with observing, that the Scripture imputes all the wickedness of an unbelieving world to the inventions of their imagination. Here all the various formations and fictions of idolatry began: and they never ended, but in the total perversion of truth, the corrupting of manners, and the sanctifying of cruelty and all kinds of immorality. The old idols are many of them out of fashion: but the restless mind of man can never forbear its fictions; so that new idols are daily rising up; not without the pomp and pageantry of the old, to recommend them: such as liberty without law; majesty in the populace; equality in all ranks; by which and other like phantoms, while the world is amused, it is betrayed into confusion and calamity; and God alone can tell whether it will ever more

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be reduced to peace and order: for which, however, we should daily pray.

We have now seen how the imagination leads into sin; let us next inquire how it brings us into misery. For it is always found by those who consider the righteous ways of divine Providence, that men are punished by those things wherein they offend. When the entrance of sin brought sickness and death upon the body, the imagination also became weak and subject to some grievous distempers. It seems to be the faculty on which the fall hath taken effect. So long as it continues in a sound state, it is like a mirror, plane and bright, and reflects all objects truly: but if its polish be injured, it reflects them imperfectly; and then we conceive things slowly and obscurely: if it be lost, as in the case of idiots, it reflects nothing—and as there is no wickedness where there is no imagination, language gives the name of *an innocent* (Fr. *un innocent*) to the idiot. If the mirror hath
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a false figure, it will give the image wrong: it will make great things appear little, or little things great; or even distorted and monstrous, though they are regularly formed and beautiful. Sometimes one certain image is seen constantly by the mind, as if a figure were burned in upon the face of a mirror: and in some cases, the mind forms images involuntarily, and becomes like a body which has lost its retentive powers, and is both active and passive at once. Neither must we forget, that images are forced upon the mind, for torment, by the malignant Being who first introduced them for sin: even heathens were persuaded that ideas of horror might be raised in the mind, for punishment, by tormenting Furies. In all such extreme cases as these, the person is mad; his imagination is under no more controul when he is awake, than that of rational men when they are asleep; whence it is plain, the humiliating distemper of madness, the most deplorable evil of man's life, is seated in the imagination, where sin

first began. And if it be considered, that there is no man, who at all times has the perfect command of his imagination, what can we say, but that all minds are subject to a sort of weakness, which may pass for a degree of insanity? The imaginations of some ingenious persons, particularly those of a poetical turn, work so freely and so violently, that they are nearer to madness than other men; and sometimes actually fall into it. If so, it seems as if what we call *genius*, may, in certain cases, be infirmity: like the beautiful variegations of a flower, which are known to proceed from the weakness of the plant.

It is scarcely credible, how much the evils of life are magnified, multiplied, and even created, as the imagination happens to be affected: which can strike with such force upon the passions, that sudden fear and terror, or even joy and surprize, have been followed by instant death. Persons of lively imaginations have irritable nerves; they suffer
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more from pain and grief of every kind; and pay a severe tax for their boasted sensibility. They that use but little air and exercise, and accustom themselves to an indolent delicate way of life, grow lax and soft and effeminate, and suffer more on every occasion, than those that rise early, and fare hardly, and preserve a firmness of habit and constitution. Too many there are, who by giving themselves up to the luxury of the imagination, become totally worthless and useless in their minds; never acting from reason and duty, but always from the impulses of fancy, which is no reasoning faculty. Many are taken off from the necessary employments of life, and fall into poverty and contempt, because truly, their imagination will allow them no time to work. Instead of feeding upon their labour, they are starving upon their thoughts. In every station of life, the indolent never fail to be tormented with imaginary evils; they contradict the great and universal law of God; who hath ordained, that man shall eat his

bread, not in the fancies of his brain, but in the sweatings of his brow. Let it also be observed, that for want of useful employment, the mind wears and preys upon itself, like a mill, when it is not supplied with corn to work upon. We are all rightly informed, and, I believe, most of us convinced by experience, that man's life is a struggle, a warfare, a passage over a dangerous sea: but none can understand to what degree, and in what extent it is such, till they have reviewed the errors, and dangers, and sufferings of the imagination.

It is therefore our duty, and will be our wisdom, to consider how we may best secure ourselves against these evils.

First then, that the imagination may not be dangerously employed, let it be turned to its proper use. The word of God presents no images to the mind, but to lead us into truth; that word ought therefore to be the daily

daily object of our attention. To set a mistaken value upon things, and make false estimates; to take little things for great, and great for little, is the worst misfortune that can befall the mind of man: his whole life is hereby thrown out of its due course; he becomes useless to others, and unhappy in himself. On the contrary, the Scripture gives us a sure rule for finding the weight and measure of every thing: and with the use of it, let us beseech God to deliver us from the wandering of our thoughts; by which we are so apt to be disturbed in our meditations and devotions. Every serious Christian must have found, how troublesome and impertinent the imagination is, when the soul should be given up to its prayers; by which all our sacrifices are so interrupted, and rendered so imperfect, that another prayer is commonly necessary at last, for forgiveness upon all the prayers that have gone before.

2. If we know the true excellence of the Scripture in furnishing the mind with images, we shall of course avoid all such reading as only fills the head with empty visions; which is too often the only excellence that can be found in works of genius. In a corrupt age, the vanity of invention abounds: idle novels arise, to feed upon public folly; as worms breed in putrid flesh, and then live upon it. Those fashionable productions, whose object is only to amuse, are the ruin of thousands, who collect from thence false ideas of themselves and of the world, which betray them into fatal mistakes, and render them totally unfit for the business of life. Nor is this the worst: the disappointed mind, with vanity to inflate it, and nothing solid to support it, is driven to the agonies of despair, and to the last miserable refuge of despair — God send better things to every Christian soul in which there is a spark of grace!

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3. Many strange doctrines, with a colouring of religion upon them, have been propagated of late years, nearly allied to the old heathen magic; which lead people into a new land of shadows and dreams, and have been known to produce such an effect upon the imagination, that it sees spectres at noon day, and is under the delusions of sleep while it is wide awake. If such reports are true, they should teach Christian people to beware how they listen to miraculous novelties in religion or pharmacy.

4. He that would be *sober-minded* must also learn to regulate his bodily appetites. Experience must have taught us all, what an effect our diet has upon our dreams: and it must, in its degree, have a like effect upon our waking thoughts. How differently do the same things appear according to the different states of the body! When the blood is inflamed, the mind falls into a delirium: and it is worthy of consideration, whether
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there be not persons, who, though not accounted insane, are yet never so perfectly in their senses, as they might be, if they would but do justice to their own understandings, by keeping themselves cool, and practising a little reasonable self-denial: for thus did the saints of God in the best ages preserve their minds pure, patient, humble, wise, and devout; and why should not the rule succeed as well now, when there is a natural reason for it?

5. Business is another remedy; and the best for the purpose is business with some aim, some useful object in view; to keep the thoughts at work in a right line, and prevent wanderings. Labour of some kind is the lot of man, to keep his restless mind out of mischief: and the careful mind, even though it be anxious, is always preferable to the empty: it is delivered from itself: it no longer looks inward on that gloomy vacuity, which it is impossible to survey without being

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dispirited. The labouring part of mankind are seldom tormented with the evils of the imagination; and in this respect they have an advantage over the rich, the learned, and the delicate; who will never be cured of their weakness but by that which preserves the strength of the poor; and the labours of the field or the garden are always open to the wealthy; and will be productive of pleasure to the mind, as well as health and soundness to the senses. The Christian should carry it a little farther; and learn, as the apostle advises, to *endure hardness*, like a soldier, to keep afar off that effeminate tenderness of the frame, which induces a weakness of the imagination: and hardness of life will have the same effect upon the Christian, as it hath upon the soldier; it will lessen the fear of death, that greatest of all terrors; from which none can escape, and for which all must prepare.

6. To sum up all my rules in few words,
 "fear God and keep his Commandments,
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for this is the whole of man :” with this, man is every thing he should be ; and without it he is nothing. His security can be found only in that, with which all wisdom should begin and end, Religion ; I mean the religion of faith, hope, and charity. The first conflict in Paradise was between faith and imagination ; and it is continued, under the original form, at this day. *Imaginations and thoughts*, according to the language of the text, are the ruin of man : faith is the victory that overcomes them both. What imagination raises, however high and strong, faith throws down ; and brings every thought into captivity : and having no dependence on man or itself, but only on God’s truth, it is steadfast and unmoveable against all the changeable forms of human wisdom. Hope, like the sunshine that gilds all objects, improves every innocent enjoyment, and makes every state of life supportable. Charity, delivered from the tormenting selfishness of nature, is the friend of God and man ; and preserves a conscience

void of offence. Where *these three* are found, there will the *Peace of God* abide : and with it that illumination of the heart, that holy light of the day-star, before which all imposture is detected, all shadows fly away. In which state, keep us, O God of Truth, according to the measure of this present time ; and bring us to the consummation of it in thy presence, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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stand, there will the Lord abide; and
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